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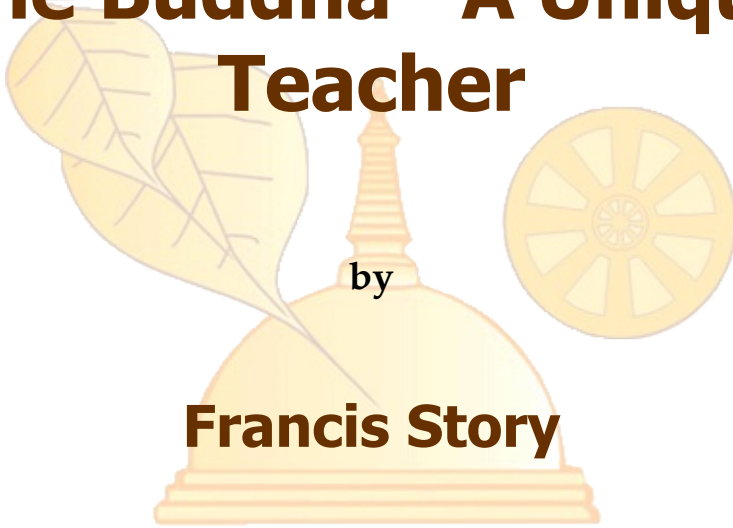
The Buddha— A Unique Teacher

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by

Francis Story

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The Buddha—A Unique Teacher

History has produced many great figures, but none in this present cycle or time as impressive and memorable as that of Siddhattha Gotama, the Sakyan prince who became the world's greatest spiritual guide. He was unique as a personality, and unique as a teacher. There have been countless Enlightened Ones before him and there will be more, as long as *samsāra* endures, but he is the only one of whom we have actual historical knowledge, and his life has been a source of wonder and inspiration for more than twenty centuries. It continues to be so today.

Every Buddhist is familiar with the miraculous stories connected with Prince Siddhattha's birth and early manhood. The traditional tales handed down from generation to generation of Buddhists are full of marvels, some of which are difficult for the modern mind to accept as literally true. In this, Buddhism is no different from other creeds. All of them have their accretions of the supernatural, the legends that time and the devotion of the faithful have woven about the lives of their founders. But whereas in most other religions the supernatural events are an essential part

of the faith, to be held as proof that the founder was a divine personage, an incarnation of God or a prophet especially singled out to be God's spokesman on earth, in Buddhism they have no importance at all, because the Buddha did not claim to be any of these things. A Buddhist may believe the stories literally, or he may regard them as fiction. The uniqueness of the Buddha does not rest upon miracles, but upon the plain, ungarlanded facts of his life and, above all, on the realisable truth of his teaching.

The facts themselves are powerful enough to move us to awe and veneration. They confront us with something outside normal experience, a challenge to the world's accepted values and to some of its most cherished goals.

The world of Prince Siddhattha's time was not so very different from our own. Then, as today, men were inclined to worship power; they strove for wealth and position, revelled in luxury when they could, and lamented their poverty when they could not. They loved and hated, quarrelled and cheated, were cowards at times and heroes at times, were mean and noble by turns, just as they are now. They placed the greatest value on the pleasures of the senses and did their best to ignore the tragedies around them, turning a blind eye to sickness and pain, and above all trying to forget the death that awaits us all, king and

beggar alike.

And who was in a better position to enjoy life than the young prince of the Sakyas? Surrounded by every conceivable luxury, he was protected by his anxious father from even the distant sight of ugliness and suffering. His days were spent in delightful gardens from which every withered leaf had been diligently removed. The melodious song of birds and the splash of fountains soothed his ear; the green shade of cool arbours shielded him and his companions from the noonday heat, and the air was filled with the languorous scent of jasmine and frangipani. And at night, in the lofty hall of the palace where great fans of peacock feathers gently stirred the air, he would watch the dancing girls weaving sinuous patterns in the soft glow of perfumed lamps until, lulled by drowsy music, he would drift into the peaceful sleep of youth. The dancers would one by one stretch themselves on the carpeted floor and relax their tired limbs; the fingers of the sitar-player would slip from the strings, and all would be quiet as the flickering lamps burned out.

And so it was from day to day, a light and carefree existence. Why, then, was the young prince not happy? Could it be that he was troubled by some dark knowledge from a life before this? Did he suspect that the world outside the palace walls was not the happy,

exquisite and gentle world he knew that had been artificially made for him? Or did he have the unconscious knowledge that his life was already dedicated to something other than this, and that a supreme, self-chosen task lay before him?

We do not know. But a day came at last when four sights met his eyes and changed the whole course of his life. For the first time he saw old age, sickness and death. And then, grieved beyond measure by this revelation of the true nature of existence, and pondering a remedy for its universal ills, his troubled eyes encountered the fourth sight—a man in a patched yellow robe, with shaven head and an alms-bowl in his hand. It was another thing he had never seen before and he did not know what it meant. But when he learned its meaning, the understanding of his destiny dawned clear and decisive for him. This was the hard path of the seeker for deliverance, the path he had to take. The fragile world of beauty and joy his father had created was shattered. It could not hold him any longer.

That night his slumber was uneasy. Rousing himself and shaking off his death-haunted dreams, he looked around him. The dancing girls lay where they had sunk down, their limbs sprawled among the fading petals of their garlands, their scanty dress in disarray and their damp hair clinging to their cheeks. Some

were twitching in their sleep as though tormented by insects; some were snoring, open-mouthed, with saliva drooling from their painted lips. It seemed to him that he was seeing them for the first time as they really were, and he felt as though he were surrounded by corpses. Lifeless and pitiful they lay there in the dying light of the lamps, and all the sorrow of the world flooded the young prince's heart.

But still it was not easy for him to carry out his decision. Yasodhara, his young bride, gave birth to a son. When they asked him what name should be given the boy, he replied, "Rāhula." A fetter. With what bitter agony he must have uttered that word. This was another bond of love to be torn out of his life.

For no fetter, human or divine, could bind him. That same night he rose from his couch when all was still, and he quietly picked his way out of the hall between the strangling arms and legs of the dancing girls. Now they seemed repulsive to him; he knew that never again would beauty alone have power to stir his senses. Instead of the soft flesh he saw the white bones of death, and the smell of decay was in his nostrils.

In her room, Yasodhara was sleeping, the baby held against her breast. Silently he looked at them a long moment; then he let the curtain fall back, and turned away.

He left the palace in the dead of night secretly and rode away, a fugitive from that which other men most desire. And then began the long, arduous years of seeking, the years in dedicated exile. First of all he had to find a spiritual teacher, and his choice fell upon Ālāra Kālāma, a renowned yogin with a large following. He mastered all that Ālāra Kālāma was able to teach, but he was not satisfied. He placed himself under another instructor, the celebrated Uddaka Rāmaputta, who was said to have attained the highest level of yogic transcendence. Again he became equal to the master, yet still was not convinced that final release from the ills of conditioned existence had been gained. Both of these teachers were advanced in years, and when they saw that the disciple had become their equal they urged him to take their place at the head of their followers. But the prince-ascetic was not to be tempted. He knew, if they did not, that there was a higher goal still to be reached. Union with Brahman had been attained, no doubt; but the experience was inconclusive. What if the Brahmas themselves were still involved in the round of birth and death? Was he to stop short of that complete release from suffering, for the sake of which he had sacrificed everything he held dear in normal life?

There was another path he had not yet tried. It was a fearful and dangerous one; nevertheless, he

determined to follow it. There were ascetics living in the depths of the forest or in cemeteries or wandering from place to place homeless and shelterless who subjected themselves to the most extreme physical torture. Their belief was that by fasting and mortification of the flesh they could release themselves from earthly bondage; they hoped that by dying as to the body they could obtain immortality in the spirit. To them, the body was a prison that kept them from union with the "divine soul," and their aim was to destroy its hold while they yet lived. Among them were some who wanted power, for it was also believed that by protracted austerities, so much spiritual strength could be accumulated that even the gods would be forced to obey their will.

The Samana Gotama, as he was then called, did not want that. He longed only for the end of suffering, and perhaps this was the way to find it. He left the ashrams as he had left the royal palace, and took to the life of a forest-dwelling ascetic. For six years he followed that path with unflagging resolution. Shelterless, his body exposed to the burning summer sun, the drenching rains of the monsoon and the cold of winter nights, he lived from day to day, from year to year. Gradually he reduced his food until he was subsisting on one grain of rice a day and his body became a skeleton covered only by parched,

weathered skin. Other ascetics—men who had been practising less rigorous austerities— marvelled at his zeal no less than at his powers of endurance. It seemed that only by a miracle could that emaciated body still harbour life.

There were five ascetics in particular who looked upon him as one who was certainly destined to reach the goal. They took him as their leader, revering him as one who had already touched the divine essence.

But it could not go on. A point was reached beyond which the enfeebled body could no longer bear up. The prince of the Sakyas, the prince of ascetics, fell unconscious, a heap of bones and dry skin on the ground.

They thought he was dead, but he was not. Consciousness came back, slowly and painfully, to that stricken body. And with it came the realisation that the goal had not been reached. The path of self-mortification too, had failed.

One of the characteristics of a wise man is that he knows when his present line of action has failed him and it is time to abandon it for something fresh. While others continue to follow the same futile course from stubborn habit, he recognises its uselessness and seeks another way. So it was with the Samaṇa Gotama. He had carried the burden of asceticism to its last

extreme, the threshold of death, and had found it worthless. If there was indeed a path to liberation it was not to be found through the breaking of the body, but rather through the breaking of barriers in the mind. With the same unfaltering decision he had shown in all his previous acts, he at once gave up his suicidal fasting and took to a simple but sufficient diet again. The reaction of his five followers was to be expected. They deserted him. In their unimaginative eyes he was a failure, and they turned away from him with scorn.

Had they possessed a little more patience, a little more faith in a man who surely had displayed enough courage and determination to warrant it, they might have been present at the greatest event in our history—the attainment of Buddhahood. As it was, when the ascetic Gotama seated himself at the foot of the Asvattha tree with the unshakable resolution that though his flesh and bones should wither and decay, he would not rise until enlightenment had been gained, he did so in solitude. No human eye witnessed that act of supreme decision. No human voice was heard to acclaim him in the moment of victory. No human hands were folded to pay homage when he rose at last, the conqueror of death.

Nevertheless, it was to those same five ascetics that the Buddha first revealed the Way that he had found.

His two former teachers, Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, had passed away, and were in the Brahma realm to which their attainment had led them. The Buddha, whose teaching was for those who could practise it here and now, made his way to Banaras, where he found his former disciples living in the Deer Park at Isipatana. It was to those who had forsaken him that he gave the first taste of the liberating truth. He knew that, despite their limitations, they were worthy. The Wheel of the Law was set in motion, and it was they who became the first Arahants.

The exertions of the ascetic Gotama were ended, but those of the supreme Buddha had only just begun. He had strenuously worked for the attainment of liberation not for himself alone, but for all who were able to profit by it. So began the task of his ministry, the spreading of the Dhamma, which he was to carry out untiringly for forty-five years.

With what skill, patience and understanding he did it can be seen from the record of his sermons, the *Sutta Piṭaka*. The unerring insight by which he knew just how to present his teaching best to whatever type of people he was addressing, constitutes the Buddha's true miracle, the *desanā pārihāriya*, the miracle of instruction. In giving instructions he would use the terms familiar to his listeners, and would grade his discourses according to their understanding. To some,

he would give simple moral guidance, illustrated with vivid anecdote and enforced by earnest exhortation. To others he would give philosophical truth, discussing with them the various schools of thought and the metaphysical conclusions to be drawn from them. With some, he used a gentle but penetrating irony that stripped away the vain pretensions of Brahmanical superstition. In such dialogues we see the manifestation of a cultured and perceptive mind, ever ready to accord with what was true and good wherever it was to be found, and at the same time fearlessly realistic when confronted by delusion or bigotry. But it is in those sermons where the Buddha is dealing with the practice of meditation, of mindfulness, of destruction of the impurities, that the depth and completeness of his own realisation is most clearly to be seen. In the religious literature of the world there is nothing to compare with them. They carry their own authority, the stamp of veritable insight, of truth seen face to face.

“One thing alone do I teach: suffering and the destruction of suffering.” In these words, the Buddha summed up his own mission, the burden of his life’s work for mankind. From the time of his first sermon to the five ascetics at Isipatana, to his last exhortation to the Bhikkhus before his Parinibbāna, it is this theme that runs through all his utterances. He did not claim

that he could remove suffering from the world as an omnipotent God could do, did such a God exist. He taught that there is a Way by which release from suffering could be gained, that he had found it, and that it was open to all who were prepared to follow it.

A unique Teacher, and a unique Doctrine. The Buddha, who passed into Parinibbāna two thousand five hundred years ago, is still the only guide who can lead us out of the jungle of ignorance and craving into the everlasting peace.

The Buddha, after himself attaining supreme enlightenment, preached the Noble Doctrine of Self-Emancipation for forty-five years. During that period, his utterances were treasured and memorised by innumerable of his devout followers of the Sangha, many of whom had also gained complete deliverance and, as Arahants, could confirm the truths of which the Buddha spoke, for they, like him, had “seen Nibbāna face to face”, had experienced its ineffable happiness, which is beyond any earthly concept of happiness that the ordinary man is able to achieve.

The Teaching the Buddha gave was consistent throughout; it never varied and it was never ambiguous. It laid down certain principles that are valid for all men at all times and in all circumstances; guiding principles by which men may live in the spirit

of truth and virtue, live beneficially both for themselves and for others, in an atmosphere of mutual trust, esteem and concord. And this, the only real formula for human peace, tranquillity and prosperity, is but the prelude to the greater and only permanent achievement, the crown of man's spiritual evolution, by which he becomes greater than any of the gods he has created and worshipped—the attainment of Nibbāna.

The whole of the Dhamma may be summed up in its fundamental propositions, the Four Noble Truths; and its unique quality lies in the fact that any man of intelligence can understand—at least intellectually—the first two of these Truths. He can, if he seriously applies his mind to an examination of the world about him, see for himself quite clearly that its chief characteristic is suffering (*dukkha*). He can realise that, even in the best ordered society, with poverty, disease and danger reduced to a minimum, it is still not possible to evade the hazards of sentient existence, the misfortunes that assail living beings in the form of accidents, deprivations, sicknesses of mind, and finally old age and mortality. However happy a man's life may be on this planet, it has to come to an end; and by the irony that seems to lie at the root of all human conditions, the happier the life he has led, the more sorrowful is his departing from it. Those who

are most miserable are least reluctant to die, while those who enjoy the pleasures of life are haunted by the knowledge of inescapable death. Their joys are clouded by it; they feverishly plunge from excess to excess in the hope of escaping from this gnawing pain, striving for forgetfulness when they should be striving instead for knowledge. That is the disease of our materialistic age—the knowledge that with all our science, all our plans for a richer, fuller life, we have not been able to conquer the last ramparts of suffering. We may manufacture artificial pleasures, but we cannot make them permanent. We ourselves are things of but a moment: how then can the joys we seek and cling to be made more lasting than ourselves? Time, that destroys us, destroys our world along with it.

It is by knowledge alone that we can conquer this suffering that is inherent in all life, for we can never escape from it by any other way. Its cause must be understood, in order that it may be treated at its source. The second of the Four Noble Truths points to the cause, and shows it to be craving. Human suffering is exactly proportionate to human craving, for it is in being deprived of what we are attached to that pain and grief arise. Here again, the truth is self-evident. The man who is attached to wealth worries while he has it, and is plunged in despair if he loses it.

The ambitious man works often to the ruin of his health to achieve his ambition of power; if he succeeds, he enjoys his position precariously, maintaining it against all kinds of external forces that seek to drag him down; and if his downfall comes, he sinks alone into a dishonoured grave. The man who glories in his physical power, stamina or prowess, must live to see these desert him, stripped from him by the remorseless processes of time, and he grieves at losing them.

And thus it is with all the things that human beings value and desire; each of them carries with it the canker of its dissolution. The more fervently it is desired and grasped, the more suffering attends it. But it is not in the nature of things that such advantages as these, ephemeral as they are, can be enjoyed dispassionately. The fact that men strive for them reveals that it is the impulse of craving for them that provides the motivating principle behind the life-process. Indeed, the life-impulse is itself craving—it is by desire that men work and struggle. The desire, envisaged in imagination, becomes the focal point of all man's energy: he is unhappy until he has gained it, he is unhappy if, having gained, he loses it. And his enjoyment of it while he has it is very brief, for each object of craving, once it is attained, must give place to another object. Man's nature can never be static; he

cannot for long rest satisfied with what he has. The explanation of this is a very simple one: to the ordinary man, utter satisfaction with nothing more to reach for is death itself. If his craving-impulse does not at once fashion for itself a new goal, it must search about from the point it has already attained for something else to desire—another step upward on the ladder of worldly success, another million to be added to the bank account, another refinement of sensual gratification, or another and more forceful assertion of the ego. It is the continual striving, this unrest and wearisome repetition of new desires and new satisfactions, this craving for an eternal something more that is the cause of all life's manifestations, from the evolutionary process itself to the development of great civilisations and the personal ambitions of individual human beings. And, while it is the cause of all these things that may superficially appear to be good, it is also the cause of suffering. Craving and suffering are the two points about which the whole of the life-process, forever unfulfilled, revolves. Where there is craving, there is life: where there is life, with its urgencies, its conflicts and its hazards, there is suffering.

This much of the Buddha's Teaching man does not have to take on trust; it is before his very eyes, confirmed by his own experiences and the history of

his race. Even as when the Buddha, in the moment of supreme attainment, touched the earth to bear witness to his right to the throne of wisdom and the physical universe confirmed his words, so through our knowledge of its nature the physical universe today speaks to us of this truth. For the very composition of the material world is seen to be subject to the balance of tensions—restless forces that are continually arising and passing away—and as such are the substantial mirror of our own psycho-physical nature, reflecting faithfully its impermanence, disease and lack of an abiding essence. By tensions man lives and functions in the world; by similar tensions the material substance of the world itself is held in ordered relationship. The one principle, showing itself in different manifestations, holds good throughout.

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